



The War in Burma 1942 - 1945

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Summary of the War

Harsh Terrain

Burma is a large country with a great range of topographical contrasts. Bordered by India, China and Thailand it is criss-crossed by jungle covered mountain ranges and divided by four of Asia's largest rivers, the Irrawaddy, the Chindwin, the Sittang and the Salween. Its coastline consists of vast tracts of mangrove swamp and deltas at the mouth of each of the rivers. There is also a dry plain in the centre of the country. The tropical monsoon between May and October greatly affects communications, turning many of the country's primitive roads into quagmires. Such a climate also produces potentially dangerous wildlife and the threat of disease and infection. To many of those who fought in Burma the harsh climate and terrain often presented as great a threat as the enemy.



The Japanese Advance

In January 1942 the Japanese Army crossed the river Salween to invade Burma. Already victorious in the fighting in China, Hong Kong and the Philippines, the Japanese faced weak opposition from the British and Empire troops defending the vast Burmese frontier. The defenders consisted of only two under-strength regular British battalions, two Indian Army infantry brigades and local Burmese forces. There was no RAF presence and the naval contingent consisted of a few coastal and river craft. Using already proven tactics of infiltration and mobility, the Japanese advanced rapidly, trapping two Indian brigades in a bridgehead on the east bank of the River Sittang after the bridge across the river had been prematurely blown. As the Japanese advance gained momentum, British reinforcements began to arrive but couldn't prevent the fall of Rangoon and Mandalay. British and Empire forces under Generals Alexander and Slim began the long and tortuous withdrawal to India. In what was to become the longest fighting withdrawal in the history of the British Army, the retreating troops faced problems of sickness and disease, impenetrable jungle, poor roads and constant harassment from the Japanese Air Force. They shared the retreat with thousands of civilian refugees fleeing northwards to India to escape the threat of Japanese brutality. The last exhausted stragglers finally crossed the last mountain range into India at Imphal in May 1942.

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The Japanese - Unbeatable Jungle Soldiers?

Almost as the last British and Indian forces left Burmese soil, plans were being organised for limited operations to recapture the Arakan coastal plain. Plans on even such a limited scale raised huge questions of supply and maintaining communications. Mules soon

became the preferred method of transporting supplies in difficult terrain. As fresh British troops arrived in India, training programmes were initiated to acclimatise them to jungle fighting. Massive supply depots were established and construction of a series of all-weather roads was begun. The Indian 14th Division began its cautious advance into the Arakan in September 1942 and immediately faced problems with the terrain and strong Japanese resistance. The Japanese proved as formidable in defence as they had in attack and many British and Empire troops began to think of the Japanese as unbeatable jungle soldiers. The campaign in the Arakan fizzled out after a series of setbacks and retreats early in 1943.

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The Chindits

A second campaign, later that year also failed to achieve its objectives. At the time Brigadier Orde Wingate began to propose a long range penetration force to operate behind Japanese lines. The force soon became known as the Chindits and the first Chindit Expedition, Operation Longcloth, was launched in February 1943. The operation suffered high casualties mainly from sickness, and much of the damage done to Japanese rail communications was rapidly repaired. The importance of the operation lay in its proving the British troops could fight on equal terms with the Japanese in the Jungle.

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Operation U-Go

In March 1944 the Japanese Army launched Operation U-Go, an attack on India intended to seize British supplies in Assam, inspire a rising by the Indian populace against British rule and to take pressure away from the US advances in the Western Pacific. As with their 1942 campaign, the Japanese would rely on mobility, infiltration and captured supplies to maintain the momentum of the attack. A month earlier the Japanese had launched Operation Ha-Go which was intended to support U-Go by drawing British attention away from the Imphal area where the brunt of the U-Go attacks would take place. As the Japanese 55th Division attacked northwards in the Arakan, British forces employed new defensive techniques to counter the Japanese infiltration tactics. Forming defensive boxes, supplied by air, they held out against determined Japanese assaults until the Japanese were forced to withdraw, short of supplies. Fighting was very fierce in the Admin Box and around the Ngakyedauk Pass where British troops fought off a series of determined Japanese attacks. These tactics were again employed on a larger scale when Imphal and Kohima were surrounded during Operation U-Go. One British battalion, the 4th Bn Royal West Kents, and some additional garrison troops at Kohima held out against the Japanese 31st Division until relieved ten days later by the British 2nd Division. In the fighting they held off over twenty-five full scale infantry attacks, suffering very heavy casualties with over 200 men killed. At Imphal a larger perimeter was established, with British troops defending the surrounding

heights. The fighting continued at Kohima and Imphal until the Japanese withdrew with heavy casualties due to the nature of the fighting, lack of supplies and sickness.

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The Second Chindit Expedition

As Japanese forces were engaged in operations to invade India, the Second Chindit Expedition, Operation Thursday, was launched inside Burma. Establishing airfields and strongholds behind Japanese lines, the Chindit columns harassed the Japanese 18th Division and their supply lines, to relieve pressure on General Stilwell's joint US & Chinese Forces. The operations was marred by the death of Orde Wingate in an air crash during its early stages, after which the Chindits were placed under the command of Stilwell and used in the unsuitable role of infantry soldiers.

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Resurgence of the 14th Army

The start of the monsoon in May 1944 did not herald the end of the campaigning season as had previously been the case. General Bill Slim's 14th Army continued the advance against the retreating Japanese towards the River Chindwin. As British, Indian and West African troops advanced southwards they came across evidence of the shortage of rations and sickness amongst Japanese troops. In the Kabaw Valley, troops would often find the skeletal remains of groups of Japanese lying on the track or rudimentary huts. By the end of 1944, the Allies were ready to advance onto the central plains of Burma. Employing new tactics, using a combination of tanks and infantry, long columns advanced southwards, destroying Japanese piecemeal resistance. The problem of long supply columns was solved by air drops and air support began to be used more frequently. Amphibious landings started to taken place on the Arakan coast and bridgeheads established over the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers. Mandalay was captured on 20th March 1945 by 19th Indian Division after Japanese forces were thrown into confusion by Slim's brilliant divisionary attack at Meiktila. Two months later Rangoon fell and Japanese troops retreated to the River Sittang. The war in the Far East finally ended with the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

The 14th Army by 1945 was a truly multinational force with divisions drawn from Great Britain, India and West Africa and small contingents from other countries within the Empire. The campaign in Burma had been fought against a determined enemy over difficult and dangerous terrain, by troops a long way from home.